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ABSTRACT

Teachers can and should use the insights of ethnographic research responsibly in their teaching. Ethnography is an attempt to understand cultures or parts of cultures from the point of view of those who participate in them. It is in the discontinuity between home and school uses of literacy that most ethnographers who study literacy locate the failure of children from lower socioeconomic communities. One critic of ethnographic research in education contends that cultural differences are replacing cultural deprivation as the fashionable excuse for school failure. Ethnographic studies do, however, acknowledge that even if the educational system does not hold students responsible for the ability to produce and understand the standard language, the workplace will. One noted ethnographer discusses the necessity of helping students link language choices to life chances, to help students exploit what they have learned in their communities about how to learn and how to use language in order to become speakers and writers of the standard language. Herein lie the greatest potential contributions and the worst possible hazards of ethnographic research. (An outline of this paper, a summary of results from one ethnographic literacy study, and a four page bibliography are included.) (HTH)

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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF LITERACY AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

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Ethnographic studies of literacy in school (Dyson 1984; Edelsky and others 1983; Gilmore 1983) and out of school (Heath 1983; Scollon and Scollon 1982) have many significant insights to offer both teachers of English, especially teachers of nonmainstream students, and their trainers. These studies give teachers new perspectives on how literacy may be functionally defined, how various communities use literacy, and most importantly how, in Heath's words, to link "the personalized, contextualized, orally expressed knowledge of the home" and "the depersonalized, decontextualized, primarily written knowledge of the classroom." Yet ethnographic studies of literacy offer no sure-fire method for the teaching of literacy skills. In fact, in response to an article by Courtney Cazden in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Judith Kleinfeld (1983) aptly points out, ethnographers and those they influence may unwittingly do more harm than good in rationalizing the actual avoidance of literacy education in the standard language.

As an ethnographic researcher, I am especially concerned about Kleinfeld's criticism; as a teacher and sometime trainer of teachers, I am convinced that teachers can and should use the insights of ethnographic research responsibly in their teaching. Consequently, I would like to talk today about the applicability of ethnographic research on literacy to the teaching of the language arts at all levels as well as the potential limits on that applicability.

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Before I proceed, let me take the time to define what I mean by ethnographic studies of literacy. While practitioners of ethnography, like practitioners in most fields, disagree among themselves about the exact nature of their field, most would agree that ethnography is an attempt to understand cultures or parts of cultures from the point of view of those who participate in them; in other words, ethnography concerns itself with people's beliefs and assumptions about how and why the world around them is the way that it is. It is likewise concerned with what it takes for an individual to be accepted into a culture as a member of that culture, that is what that individual would have to know and how she or he would have to behave--to dress, to talk, to act--in order to become an "insider."

Let me give a couple of examples here. An ethnographic study of the skateboard culture, for instance, and I use this example because I know someone who is doing research on skateboarders, would include information about what kind of skateboard one should have, how it should be decorated, and, as you insiders will know, what kind of wheels it must have; it would also include information about what kind of music a skateboarder would listen to, where he'd get his hair cut and colored, where he'd spend his free time, and, what he'd look for in a girlfriend. The ethnography would probably also include discussions of why members of the skateboard culture are all male between the ages of 16 and 24 and why individuals might be

inclined to joint that culture in the first place. If it were a good ethnography, it would not doubt demonstrate how all of these discrete facts fit together to form the internally consistent and coherent culture of the skateboarders.

Amusing but not very practical, you might say; I'll leave the justification of that study to my colleague. For our second example, let's move closer home and talk about ethnographic studies of literacy. What would such studies consider and why? Here, I'd like to use the work of Shirley Brice Heath, a professor of anthropology and linguistics in the Department of Education at Stanford, as the focus of the discussion. In a most provocative article entitled "What no bedtime story means," Heath looks at bedtime stories and how they are told--or not told--in three communities--Trackton, a working-class black community; Roadville, a working-class white community; and Mainstown, a middle-class community--in a town in the Piedmont Carolinas. She then relates these facts and other related facts about language use in these communities to the "life chances" students from these communities have as all attend local schools and later live in nearby communities.

Some of her findings are given on your handout as number 1. Number two on your handout gives a summary of the uses of literacy in Trackton, the blue-collar Black community that she studied. As you will note, the functions for which literacy is used are by no means limited to Trackton; college

professors, for example, use literacy to reconfirm knowledge--Trackton residents read their Bibles whereas literature professors read their Beckett or Faulkner. The important observations, as Heath points out, are the patterns of literacy use for the community and the systematic ways in which these patterns differ from those of the mainstream community described in number one. Of course, since school teachers are members of the mainstream community--by education, if not by birth--the uses of literacy in school are, not surprisingly, exactly like the uses of literacy in the mainstream community. And it is precisely at this point of conflict, at this discontinuity between home and school uses of literacy, that Heath, and indeed most ethnographers who study literacy, locate the failure of children from Trackton and Roadville as well as similar communities across the country.

Permit me an aside here, with the hopes of heading off a possible misunderstanding. Heath is not contending that all black communities across the country are like Trackton or that all blue-collar white communities across the country are like Roadville; she is instead arguing that the less a community's ways of using literacy are like those of the middle class, the greater the likelihood that children from that community will have problems at school. She would, however, add that many the uses of language and literacy in Trackton have a great deal in common with those in other black working-class communities; the

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same goes for the uses of language and literacy in Roadville and other white working-class communities.

Surely, Heath, more than any ethnographer of education or literacy, has been able to take her findings and use them as the basis for educational change and more importantly, educational improvement. Those of you who are interested in how she managed this feat should take the time to read some of her work, especially her book, *Ways with Words*, which is an honest appraisal of what she and the teachers she worked with attempted and how well they succeeded and the extent to which those teachers continue to succeed.

I am purposely not telling you exactly what she did or how or why. First, the limited time I have to speak does permit me such liberties. More important, however, is the fact that you, as teachers and trainers of teachers, need to study Heath's work --or that of any ethnographer or researcher of any persuasion-- before attempting to apply her or his techniques or findings to your own situations. This point brings me to Kleinfeld's criticism of ethnographic research in education. She contends that "cultural differences are replacing cultural deprivation as the fashionable excuse for school failure" (1983, p. 283, italics in original). Those of you who lived through the early 70's do not need to be reminded of Basil Bernstein's work on elaborated and restricted codes and the ways in which it was marshalled into

the service of those who, quite well-meaningly, believed that if we could only get those poor white and black children out of those culturally deprived neighborhoods while they're young still enough, we could homogenize and pasteurize them until they're indistinguishable from children born and reared in middle-class households--no more substandard English, no more unemployment, no more poverty. Of course, the plan didn't work: "substandard English," unemployment, and poverty are still around and flourishing--even (or especially) in this election year.

If Kleinfeld is right, then we all have cause for worry. The last thing teachers or the general public needs is another passel of unfilled and unfulfillable promises, whether from politicians or ethnographic researchers. Kleinfeld supports her contention by discussing experiences she has had as a professor of educational psychology at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. As most of you will know, many of the most volatile educational issues in that state relate to the question of adequate and appropriate education for its Native American population. Kleinfeld argues, as she had argued earlier (1975), that "anthropology (by which she means "ethnography") has given education students a new and somewhat more sophisticated set of rationalizations for giving up" (p. 284). She illustrates the kind of reasoning she is criticizing with the following example:

The reading problem [of Native children] . . . is caused by cultural differences between English and Native languages. Teaching children to read English is wrong

since "they should be allowed to continue their own ways." So if the school just changes to fit the culture, providing books and reading achievement tests in Native languages and not holding them "responsible for [reading in] English," the problem disappears." (p. 285)

The logic is not new: the controversy over Black English spawned similar suggestions, and unfortunately for all we have learned about the nature of Black English, we have made little headway in helping the general public--black or white--understand what dialects are and when they do and don't matter. We have been forced to acknowledge, however, that the workplace will continue to discriminate against individuals who do not speak and write Standard English, as undefined as that variety of the language may be, regardless of their ethnicity or the social class of their parents. In other words, if our educational system fails to hold students responsible for the ability to produce and understand the standard language, especially in its written forms, the workplace will--despite the protests from sociolinguists across the land--continue to do so. Access to social mobility, especially for those of any race, class, or gender who have been denied access in the past, requires a command of the prestige varieties of the spoken and written language and an ability to use those varieties in a number of contexts.

Ethnographic studies of education acknowledge this fact; indeed the best ones are predicated on it. (As for the others,

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I'd simply say that poor educational research has no favorite paradigm; whether one counts and quantifies or observes and interprets, he or she can produce worthless findings). Here, let me return to the work of Shirley Heath. In one of the most moving sections of her book, she discusses the possibility, nay, the necessity of helping students link language choices to life chances. She describes ways in which she and her collaborators found ways to help students exploit what they had learned in their communities about how to learn and how to use language in order to learn how to become members of the discourse community of users of the spoken and written varieties of the standard language.

Herein lie the greatest potential contributions and the worst possible hazards of ethnographic research. Yes, ethnographic studies are often long and complicated, but no less complicated than the world is. Indeed, I am still a bit shocked at the naivete of those who accept the findings of many quantitative researchers. Quantitative research has a very important place in education, but quantitative research alone will not help us find the answers to educational problems precisely because of the human factors involved. Neither educators nor education can afford to be concerned only with the majority of the population; part of the challenge we face is dealing with those who don't fit perfectly stratified samples, those who don't last until the end of the research project, and

those who refuse to cooperate. In this respect, quantitative and ethnographic research is similar: neither is easily translated into classroom practice. Quantitative research often appears to be easily translatable, for its findings can be simply summarized, often into quotable maxims, such as "Teaching students where to place commas in handbook exercises will reduce the national deficit." But those of us who have been around for any length of time at all know the folly of efforts to apply such maxims in any meaningful way in the classroom. Here ethnographic research confirms our knowledge: it acknowledges that translating research findings into practice will be a task requiring great/ thoughtful effort.

In return, ethnographic research helps us and those we teach see the world in new ways; we come to understand how some corner of the world works and what role we play and might potentially play in those workings. Here I give a personal example of some observational research I had my students do. In the Freshman composition classes I'm currently teaching, students spent the first month of the school year recording all of the ways in which they use writing in their daily lives. When the time came for them to write a classification essay, instead of classifying the kinds of guys or political supporters or Christians on campus, they categorized the ways in which they used writing--whether by audience or frequency or purpose or worth.

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By their own admission, they came to see things they'd never noticed before: the influence of purpose or audience on form and content, the taken-for-granted relationships between and among various kinds of writing, and perhaps most importantly, the centrality of writing in the lives of college-educated individuals. As a result, they are beginning to see themselves as writers in training, as apprentices in the discourse communities to which they aspire to one day belong. They realize what English teachers have long contended: what goes on in the composition class has relevance to students's lives far beyond the classroom walls. Of course, their papers still have comma splices and non sequiturs, but their perspective on the endeavor has changed. And I might add that as the term has progressed, the number of comma splices and non sequiturs has declined dramatically.

I would not call them ethnographers or their work ethnography; I would contend, however, that they have used at least a part of the ethnographic method and that they have consequently been able to profit from the experience. We classroom practitioners are similarly situated, and ethnographic research offers us similar benefits. In reading such research, we come to see ourselves and our students in a new light. We find common ground we never knew to be there. We see differences, often important ones, that may in the past have hampered our communicating with our students.

In conclusion, then, ethnographic research, like all other educational research, offers us three options. First, as Kleinfeld points out, it can offer us rationalizations for giving up, even fashionable ones, and for not dealing with any of the moral or ethical issues involved in intercultural education. Second, it can offer us a way of justifying the status quo; for teachers of English, this alternative means that we can insist on Standard English--and nothing else, even though we, and no one else with any honesty or humility, understand what Standard English is or how its best taught or learned, all while teaching our students to be ashamed of the ways with words they have learned in their home cultures. Third, thank heavens, ethnographic research offers us a ways of making positive changes wherever we find ourselves. When we apply ethnographic research or when we help students use aspects of the ethnographic method in order to see themselves, their home cultures, their daily lives, and their aspirations in new ways, we are indeed offering them and ourselves a new kind of equality, one which permits individuals to choose responsibly, learning to "link language choices to life chances" in ways that prepare them for life in the world.

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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF LITERACY AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

- I. Potential advantages of ethnographic studies of literacy
 - A. New perspectives on how literacy may be functionally defined
 - B. New perspectives on how various communities use literacy
 - C. New perspectives on how to link "the personalized, contextualized, orally expressed knowledge of the home" with "the depersonalized, decontextualized, primarily written knowledge of the classroom" (Heath)
- II. Kleinfeld's complaint: Ethnographers and those they influence may unwittingly do more harm than good in rationalizing the actual avoidance of literacy education in the standard language.
- III. Defining ethnographic studies
 - A. The skateboard culture
 - B. Bedtime stories in three communities (Chart 1)
 - C. Uses of literacy in Trackton (Chart 2)
- IV. Kleinfeld's argument: "Cultural differences are replacing cultural deprivation as the fashionable excuse for school failure" (1983, p. 283).
- V. What ethnographic research offers: We must decide
 - A. A new excuse for giving up
 - B. An additional justification for insisting on only the standard variety of the language
 - C. A way to make positive changes wherever we find ourselves: A new kind of equality.
 1. In ourselves
 2. In our students

Chart 1. Characteristics of Literacy Events in three communities within a single town in the Piedmont Carolinas

ROADVILLE (BLUE-COLLAR WHITE)	MAINTOWN (MIDDLE CLASS)	TRACKTON (BLUE-COLLAR BLACK)
Before coming to school, these children	Before coming to school, these children learn	Before coming to school, these children learn
1) learn that the proper use of words and understanding of the meaning of the written word are important for educational and religious success 2) are not encouraged to apply their understanding of books to other situational contexts or to apply it to their general knowledge of the world about them 3) learn to see bookreading as performance 4) learn sequential skills needed for reading: cut & paste, color in the lines, match shapes 5) see that adults do not use books in their daily lives. Recipes are usually remembered; things are repaired by trial and error, not by following printed instructions 6) learn that narratives--oral or written--are judged according to their <u>factualit</u>; narratives not corresponding to the truth, whether religious truth or historical fact, are considered lies.	1) to "give attention to books and information derived from books" 2) to "acknowledge questions about books" 3) to "respond to conversational allusions to the contents of books; they act as question-answerers who have a knowledge of books" 4) to "announce their factual and fictive narratives" 5) to "accept books and book-related activities as entertainment" 6) to "listen and wait as an audience" 7) to "use their knowledge of what books do to legitimate their departures from the 'truth'" 8) that adults are interested in books--even children's books 9) that adults use books in their daily lives in cooking, repairing things, getting information	1) how to know when the form of an utterance belies its meaning and to know contexts of items and to use their understanding of these to draw parallels between items and events 2) to tell narratives (and to assert them aggressively into the ongoing flow of conversation) 3) that narratives need not be constrained by factual truth 4) that narratives, requests for information, etc. are not decontextualized 5) that meaning is often gotten from a written text by process of group negotiation/discussion 6) that oral facility is highly regarded and rewarded in the community 7) that prosody is as important as content in oral delivery
In these homes, books for children are usually alphabet books, Bible story books, coloring books, etc. There is often children's Sunday School material.	In these homes, books for children often fall into the category of "children's literature," including children's magazines.	In these homes, there is little material designed especially for children, with the exception of children's Sunday School literature. It is clear, however, that children begin quite early to read the names of products, streets, etc. as they occur in context.

Summarized from Heath, Shirley Brice. 1982. What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and at school. *Language in Society*, 11, 49-76.

Chart 2. Uses of reading and writing in Trackton

Reading

- | | |
|--|---|
| -Instrumental | Reading to accomplish practical goals of daily life (price tags, bills, house numbers, signs) |
| -Social-Interactional/
Recreational | Reading to maintain social relationships, make plans, and introduce topics for discussion and story-telling (greeting cards, letters, newspaper features, political flyers) |
| -News-Related | Reading to learn about third parties or distant events (local news items, circulars from local organizations) |
| -Confirmational | Reading to gain support for attitudes or beliefs already held (Bible, brochures on cars, loan notes, bills) |

Writing

- | | |
|---|--|
| -Memory aids
(Primarily used by women) | Writing to serve as a reminder for the writer and, only occasionally, others (telephone numbers, notes on calendars) |
| -Substitutes for oral messages
(primarily used by women) | Writing used when direct oral communication was not possible or would prove embarrassing (notes for tardiness or absence from school, greeting cards, letters) |
| -Financial | Writing to record numerals and to write out amounts and accompanying notes (signatures on checks and public forms, figures for income tax preparation) |
| -Public records
(church only) | Writing to announce the order of the church services and forthcoming events and to record financial and policy decisions (church bulletins, reports of the church building fund committee) |

Slightly shortened versions of Tables 6.1 and 6.2, Ways with words, pp. 188-199, by Shirley Brice Heath. Published in 1983 by Cambridge University Press.

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